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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000376

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TAGS: KISL PREL MO

SUBJECT: MOROCCO, THE QUDS COMMITTEE, AND THE AQSA MOSQUE
DISPUTE

Classified by Polcouns Craig Karp, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: King Mohammed VI has recently become more visibly active as Chairman of the OIC's Al-Quds (Jerusalem) Committee. In letters to President Bush, P-5 heads of state, the UN SYG, and the EU, he protested Israeli excavations on the disputed Temple Mount. The King also publicly suggested that the Quds Committee could undertake responsibility for the restoration of the crumbling Maghrebi Gate at the Aqsa complex. This proposal appears aimed at assuaging Muslim sensitivities while satisfying the Israelis' stated practical concerns. The King has often seemed ambivalent about using his father's valued perch as chairman of the Quds Committee, which groups 16 OIC member states into a body charged with coordinating pan-Islamic policy and assistance to Jerusalem. The King's recent efforts are likely motivated by the perceived need to outflank Islamists at home. End summary.

Flurry of Correspondence

¶12. (C) In the past two weeks, King Mohammed VI, in his capacity as chairman of the Al-Quds Committee (one of five standing committees of the Organization of Islamic Conference), has written to President Bush and the heads of state of the U.K., France, Russia, Germany, China, and UN SYG Ban-ki Moon. In the past week, letters were sent to the President and External Affairs Commissioner of the European Commission, as well as the Speaker of the European Parliament. All of the letters have expressed concern about the Israeli excavations near the Aqsa Mosque. The letters follow a February 6 communique issued in the King's name condemning the excavations and calling on Israel to respect international law and the sanctity of the site.

A Potential Compromise Formula?

¶13. (SBU) Maghreb Arabe Presse, the state news agency, reported on February 12 King Mohammed's proposal that the Bayt Al-Mal Al-Quds Al-Sharif, the Quds Committee's finance arm, underwrite restoration of the reportedly crumbling Maghrebi Gate on the Temple Mount. This proposal may have been a trial balloon and has not been further fleshed out to date.

¶14. (C) Comment: We are not in a position to judge the

viability of the Moroccan offer, but we recall that an analogous and generally satisfactory formula was found for external Arab funding and management of major maintainance of the Dome of the Rock in the early 1990s. At face value, the King's proposal seems aimed at reconciling the Israelis' stated practical concerns about the Maghrabi Gate's structural integrity with the international Muslim community's sensitivities about altering the site. We would not be surprised if the Moroccans had made use of their various channels with the Israelis to consult on the proposal in advance. End comment.

Mohammed VI and the Al-Quds Committee

¶15. (C) Since assuming the throne, King Mohammed VI has exercised only erratically his prerogatives as Chairman of the Quds Committee. He inherited the role from his father, Hassan II, who energetically presided over the committee from its creation at an OIC Ministerial in Jeddah in 1975, until his death in 1999. Long-term observers recall Mohammed VI's enthusiasm in the initial meetings he presided over as chair.

¶16. (C) This enthusiasm waned markedly after the emergence of the "Aqsa Intifada" in late 2000 and the concomitant decline of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Mohammed VI declined an invitation to participate in the June 2003 "Red Sea Summit" with President Bush, President Mubarak, the King of Bahrain, and (then) Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. When the King appointed Abdelkebir Mdaghri secretary of the Bayt Al-Mal, he instructed him to focus on technical and development issues, rather than political ones, and to make the fund more

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accountable. Observers speculate that had Hassan II been alive during the past five years, he would have used more actively the Quds Committee chairmanship as a "bully pulpit" from which to project himself as a relevant Islamic leader, as he did through the 1970s and 1980s, even as he kept open channels to the Israeli leadership.

An Evolving Calculation?

¶17. (C) Comment: King Mohammed VI's recent activities as Quds Committee Chair suggest that his own calculations may be changing. Apparently reluctant to engage in the "no-win" Arab-Israeli dispute, the King has instead focused principally on internal issues and on Western Sahara. The recent round of international Muslim anger over the Israeli works near the Aqsa mosque appears to have forced the King into action, mainly to shore up his credentials at home as a Muslim leader and defender of Islamic causes, and, perhaps most importantly, to outflank domestic Islamists, who have been maintaining a steady drumbeat of outrage in public fora about events in the Israel-Palestine arena. End comment.

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